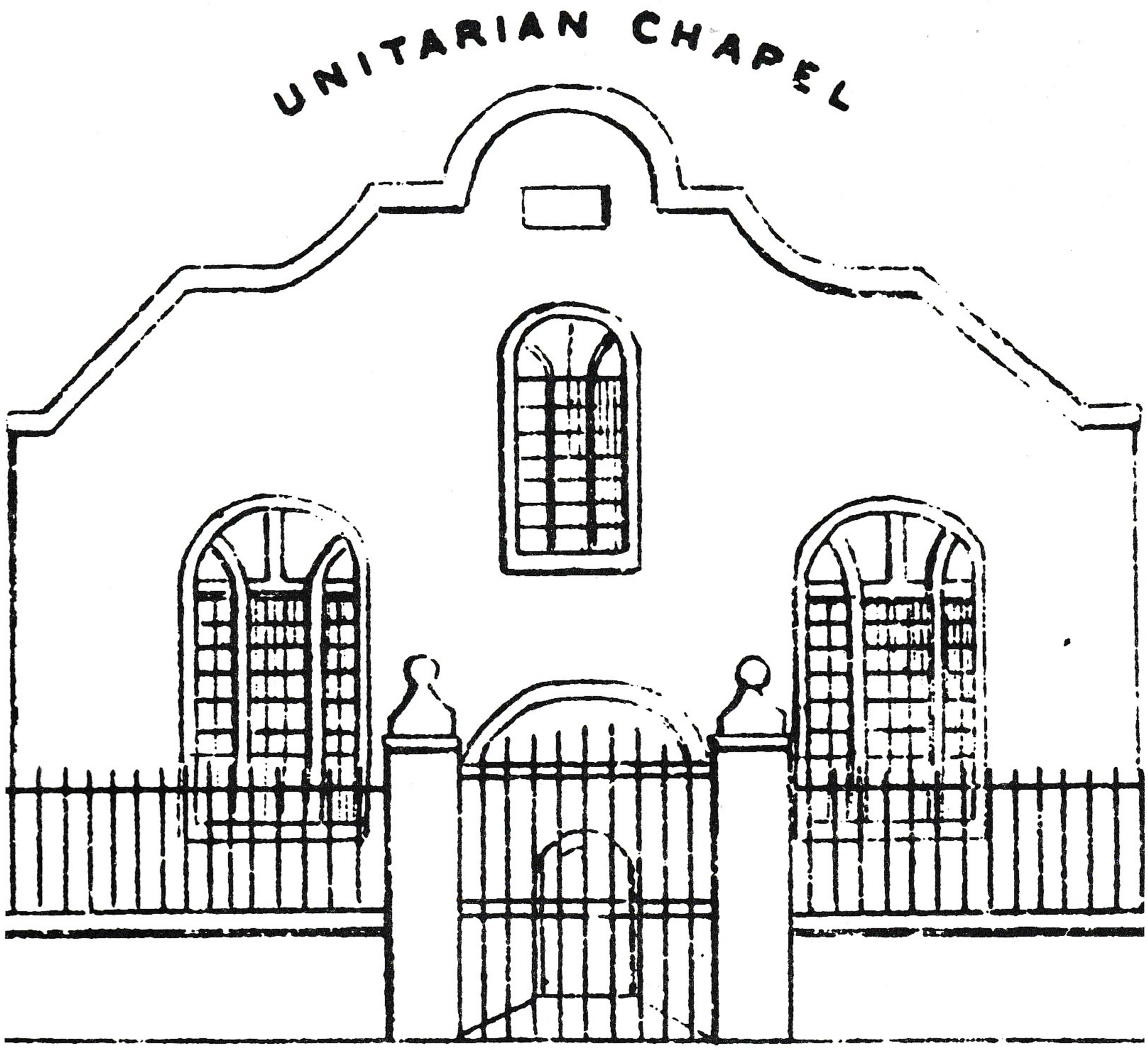
THOMAS WREN
PORTSMOUTH'S PATRON OF AMERICAN LIBERTY

Sheldon S. Cohen

THE PORTSMOUTH PAPERS 57



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Summary

In May 1756, the Revd Thomas Wren, a native of the Lake District, took up his pastoral duties at the Presbyterian chapel in Portsmouth High Street. Soon, despite his dull sermons, his 'exemplary life of charming simplicity and piety' endeared him to his congregation, and his ministry at Portsmouth continued until his death in 1787. Wren, a liberal-minded man of strong principles, supported the ideals of the American Revolution, and when a prison for 'Yankee rebels' was set up at Forton in 1777, he paid regular visits to look after the captives' welfare. He spared no efforts to improve their unsatisfactory living conditions, collected and distributed donations for their relief, and acted as a contact with the outside world. Prisoners' journals, still extant, throw light on Wren's humanitarian services, and confirm that, despite the enormous risks involved, he allowed escaping Americans to find sanctuary in his chapel until he and his associates could arrange their transport to safe houses elsewhere. After the peace, in appreciation of his kindness, Congress passed a vote of thanks, and the College of New Jersey, later to become Princeton University, awarded him an honorary doctorate. Wren's remarkable story, told here in detail, has hitherto received little attention from historians in either Great Britain or the United States.

Cover:
The Unitarian Chapel from Charpentier's 'Stranger's Guide', 1842. The chapel underwent extensive repairs in 1843.
PCRO 1330A/2/1.

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Thomas Wren, Portsmouth's Patron of American Liberty

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The German bombers flew in a series of massed wave attacks against Portsmouth on Friday evening, 10 January 1941, and again the following morning. According to one report, specially cabled to the *New York Times*, the Nazi raiders dropped 'many hundreds of explosive and incendiary bombs that killed or injured many civilians, damaged or destroyed six churches, several movie theatres, stores and houses, and rendered many persons homeless ...'[1] One of Portsmouth's destroyed churches was High Street's venerable John Pounds Memorial Chapel, founded by Presbyterians, but since the early nineteenth century a Unitarian house of worship. And among the chapel ruins was a monument which had displayed this 150-year-old epitaph:

> Thomas Wren DD
> Born in Keswick
> In the County of Cumberland
> Died October the 30th, 1787: aged 63 years
> Distinguished for sound judgement
> Useful learning, and unaffected piety:
> He was no less eminent
> For the peculiar virtues of the Christian profession
> Meekness of spirit, gentleness of manner,
> And an active and universal benevolence.
> The congregation of Protestant dissenters
> Assembling in this place,
> Where he preached for more than thirty years,
> And was a most faithful and affectionate pastor,
> In testimony of his services and their own
> gratitudes,
> Have erected this monument to his memory.[2]

Thomas Wren may have been illustrious to his communicants who erected the monument, but his name has not been in the forefront of either the histories of Portsmouth or of his native Cumberland. Similarly, American histories have been singularly neglectful of his mention despite the fact that this mild, unpretentious Presbyterian minister rendered very noteworthy services during the United States' long struggle for independence. Today his monument, unlike his High Street Chapel, remains unrestored, which reflects the undeserved obscurity of the man and his work. So perhaps it is time that the character and career of the little publicized Thomas Wren deserves elaboration for Britons and Americans alike.

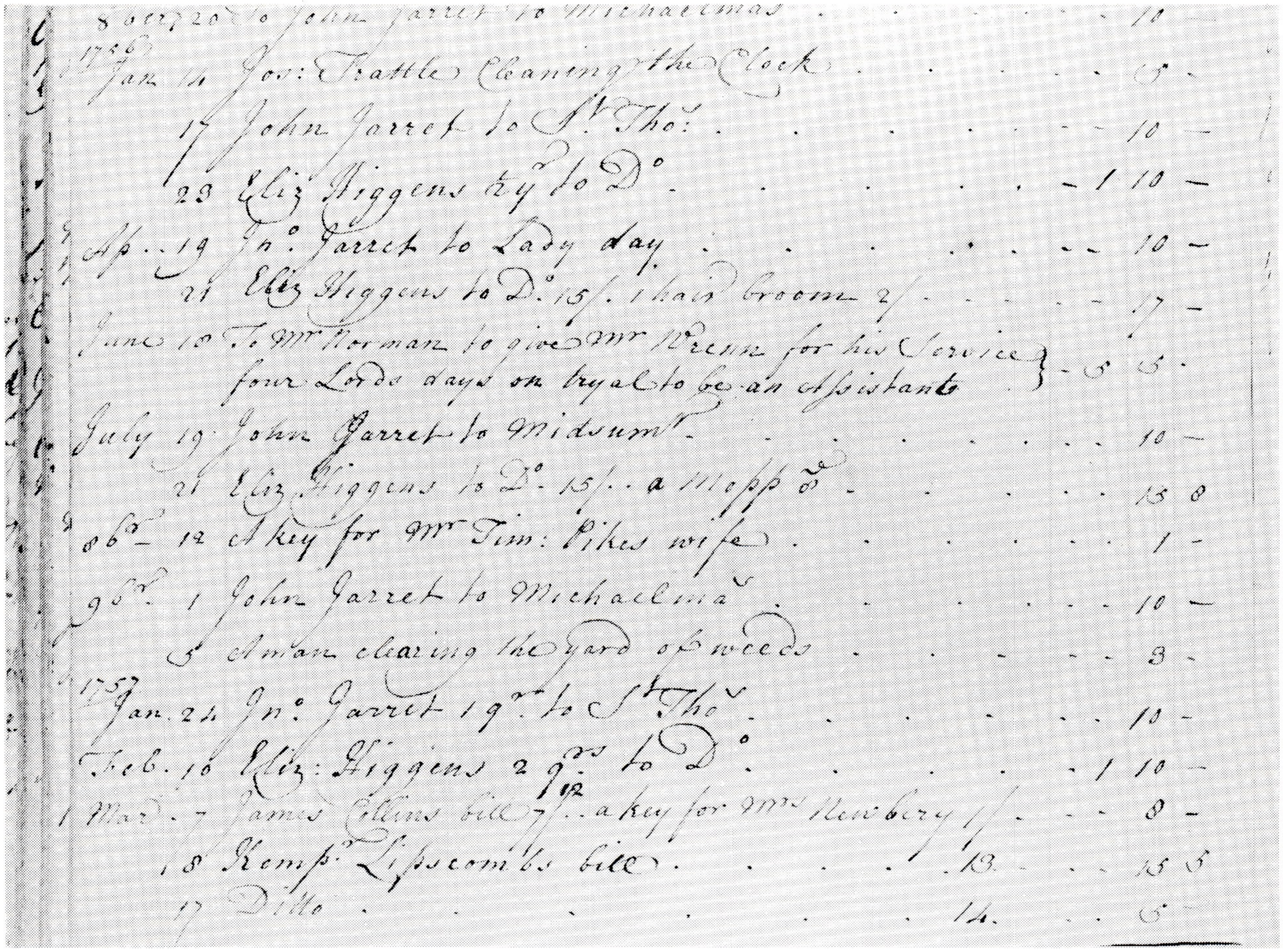
Thomas Wren (no relation to Sir Christopher Wren), was born in the tiny hamlet of Grange, four miles south of the market town of Keswick in England's Lake District, famed for its rustic beauty and breathtaking scenery of mountains, waterfalls, lakes and lush vales. Thomas Gray's lucid and poetic *Journal of the Lakes* (1769) had first popularized the loveliness of these Cumbrian scenic vistas, and later British authors including William Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge, Robert Southey and Beatrix Potter were similarly inspired by its majestic landscapes. Grange itself is located in Borrowdale, called by many the loveliest valley in Britain.[3] The village consisted of about a dozen small stone homes and farmhouses, near the Keswick road and just beyond a double humped stone bridge that spans the narrow River Derwent as it meanders northward to Lake Derwent Water. Sheep raising was the predominant agrarian pursuit in the region at the time of Wren's birth, and even today, Grange bears many of its eighteenth-century features despite the influx of campers, climbers and other modern characteristics.[4]

The name Wren was quite common in Cumberland by the eighteenth century. Although two branches of the family are mentioned in the Crosthwaite parish registers, Thomas Wren's exact ancestry has not been ascertained. It is recorded, however, that his father Timothy was from Pietnest in Borrowdale and probably descended from the Wrens of Castlerigg, a family of standing during the Commonwealth period. It is also recorded that this Timothy Wren was married to one Judith Banck (Banks) of Rigside in Borrowdale on 22 December 1716. The married couple afterwards settled in Grange where Thomas and his elder brother Timothy were born.[5]

Thomas Wren's formal schooling commenced in the Crosthwaite parish school in Keswick. The school (still in operation) stood close by the twelfth-century Crosthwaite parish church of St Kentigern. The parish school, described as comprising one large classroom with an attached teacher residence, was nominally under the control of the local Church of England vicar, then the Revd Thomas Christian. Nevertheless, such institutions offered their primary level instruction not only to Anglican sons and daughters, but also to children of dissenters like the Wrens.[6]

In September 1734 Judith Wren died and was buried in St Kentigern's graveyard, also near the parish school. After his mother's death, young Thomas evidently was sent for his secondary school education to St Bee's, a grammar school established during Queen Elizabeth I's reign in Whitehaven on the rugged Cumberland coast. During or shortly following Wren's classical studies at St Bee's, his father remarried and the familial responsibilities for Thomas and a younger sister Sarah evidently devolved upon his elder brother Timothy.[7]

Apparently Thomas Wren completed his secondary schooling at St Bee's during the early 1740's, and with his brother Timothy's financial assistance, he then journeyed to London where he entered a dissenting academy directed by the Revd David Jennings and Dr Morton



Savage. These dissenting academies had been founded principally to offer higher education for students planning to enter the dissenting Protestant ministry, and during much of the eighteenth century they reportedly provided 'far better teaching' and had a 'broader curriculum' than the two existing English universities. The Jennings and Savage academy was particularly prominent for its advanced curriculum, so that after successfully completing the school's programme and being examined, Thomas Wren was ordained to the regular Presbyterian ministry in 1753.[8]

Like many newly ordained dissenter ministers of the period, the Revd Thomas Wren preached at several locales in England before obtaining a permanent settlement. His first position came as an assistant to the Revd Joseph Evans at Brentwood in Essex. Afterwards, in December 1753, he moved on to the market town of Colchester, also in Essex, where he preached for almost a year. He also occupied pulpits in Hampstead and London's Old Jury (Jewry) Chapel, and in 1754 he was a Presbyterian cleric for several months in the small market town of Diss. Within this Norfolk community, noted for its textile industry, Wren reportedly was offered a permanent settlement. He declined the entreaties of his congregation and went to Portsmouth in May, 1756.[9] There, the Revd John Norman of the High Street Presbyterian Chapel was directed by his parishioners to pay the Reverend Thomas Wren £5 5*s*. for a trial period as his assistant. [10] Soon the post in Hampshire was to become permanent.

The fact that Wren had failed to receive more attractive offers for a permanent position following his ordination perhaps stemmed from both his alleged lack of inspiration and his sometimes questionable orthodoxy from the pulpit. Such criticisms were indicated by a fellow cleric's description during his services in Colchester:

> He preached on 1st Jan. (1754) on a public occasion in which both congregations are concerned and the poor creature, that his prayer might be exact, as well as his preaching, he had it wrote down and read to us, though with not the best of graces either. I stood at a distance and wondered at the close of every sentence (if) his eyes were turned down to his cushion, but was informed afterwards by those that saw it that his prayer was wrote down. His sermon was not suitable to the occasion, nor yet to the criterion of the divine word. It was rank Arminianism. I apprehend both by it and the conclusion of his prayer, he is cast in the Arian mode . . .[11]

Notwithstanding such aspersions, Wren was to remain secure in his Portsmouth position. Soon after his confirmation as assistant pastor, the ailing and aged Mr Norman died, and Thomas Wren succeeded him as minister of the Presbyterian Chapel.[12]

Thomas Wren's fee 'for his service four Lords days on tryal to be an Assistant' May 1756.
P(ortsmouth) C(ity) R(ecords) O(ffice) CHU 82/9/3.

The dissenter chapel was founded in 1662. In 1718, during the lengthy stewardship of the Revd Mr Norman, an impressive new brick chapel, built in the Dutch style of architecture, was completed. It replaced a smaller structure in Penny Street, evidently to meet the needs of a growing congregation, for it reportedly could accommodate 700 communicants.[13] It included an elliptical roof, deep circular windows, an upstairs gallery, sturdy oak pews, and it was set back from the street and bordered by an iron fence.[14]

During the years following his installation in this picturesque structure, Thomas Wren remained rather uninspiring from the pulpit. Several of his contemporaries noted the uncertainty that he had displayed preaching in other locales. They also cited a lack of enthusiasm, and dull and rambling sermons. Most of his communicants, though, overlooked such pecularities, which were laid in part to his northern background, and they remained satisfied with his theological conformity. Still, a conservative and evangelical minority of parishioners, throughout the term of his ministry, maintained suspicions that Mr Wren's scriptural lessons skirted dangerously close to unorthodoxy, Arian or Arminian doctrines.[15]

The general lack of acclaim for Thomas Wren's pulpit performance was quite distinct from the enthusiasm, praise, and popular following that his personal life earned within the seaport. One Portsmouth historian later reported that while living in the community, Wren, a lifelong bachelor, 'led an exemplary life of charming simplicity and piety'. He was also liberal in developing close friendships with other local clergymen including the Anglican Revd Henry Taylor, vicar of the parish church of St Thomas, situated a short distance down the High Street.[16] Concurrently, the Presbyterian cleric extended his liberality, friendliness and engaging personality to common British seamen and the town's raucous taverns that they frequented. It was even said that he loved to imitate these royal sailors, and often retold their stories 'with great humour', though he took care 'that they were never interlarded with those vulgar and irreverend (*sic*) expressions so common among that brave and useful set of men'. Such personal conduct became Mr Wren's most noteworthy trait, for as one friend later wrote of him, 'Few can be mentioned who have been more distinguished by piety and virtue, by purity of mind and able behaviour'.[17]

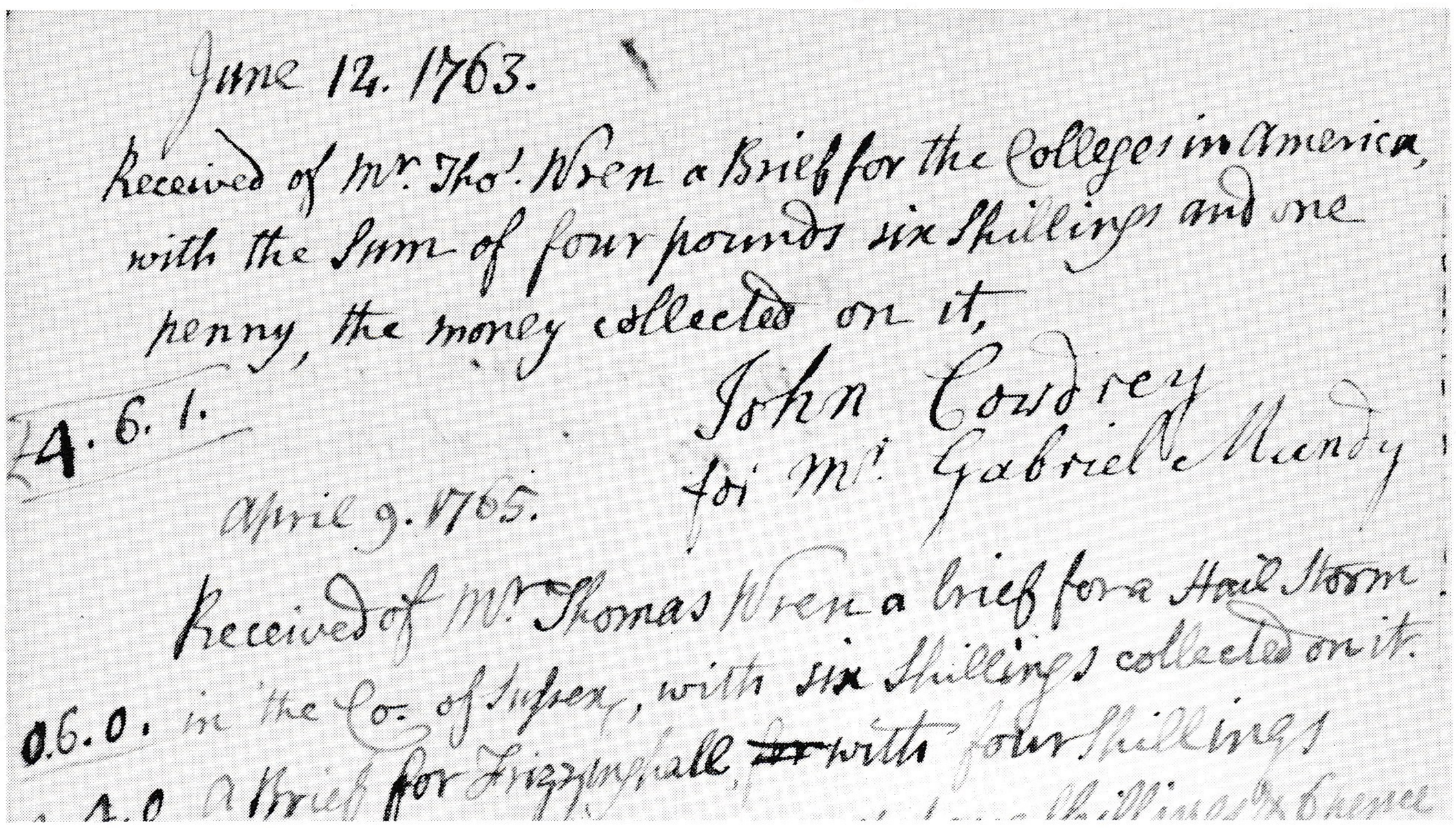
Records of the High Street Presbyterian Chapel during Wren's pastorate also attest to the altruistic and warmhearted character of the cleric. These church papers reveal that the minister oversaw the regular distribution of poor money sums to many indigent or otherwise needy residents of the community. Often, he personally delivered these beneficences and offered individual encouragement or solace that earned him considerable respect from magistrates and citizens alike. His assistance also extended beyond Portsmouth as Wren approved church grants of monies to distressed individuals and institutions in other parts of England.[18] Even the fledgling and distant College of New Jersey (later Princeton University) became a grantee; on 14 June 1763 the minister approved a 'Brief for the College in America with the sum of 4 pounds six shillings and one penny.'[19] Quite possibly these efforts on behalf of American dissenters and England's underprivileged may have influenced his subsequent decision to help the cause of American independence.

The minister's liberal theological tenets and beneficent social consciousness also might have carried over into the realm of English politics. Wren was known for his Whig tenets including a strong support for freedom of elections. Though a Portsmouth resident, he remained a Cumberland freeholder and as such he became involved in the county's celebrated electoral contests between Sir James Lowther and his rival in the northern counties, the duke of Portland. Wren supported the cause of the duke as is revealed in a letter to him dated 22 February 1768. Later, during Lord North's administration (1770–1782), the duke often opposed ministerial actions against the rebellious American colonists.[20]

The approach of revolution in the North American colonies diverted considerable concern in England from domestic political and social issues to imperial affairs. Such disquiet was especially evident in London, where during the years prior to the outbreak of hostilities, and during the subsequent war years, various groups within and outside Parliament gave varying sympathy and help to the American cause. The pro-American groups outside Parliament generally were followers of the fiery politician John Wilkes and the contention they sparked was frequently reported in the metropolitan press.[21]

Although seventy-three miles distant from the capital's conspicuous polemics, Portsmouth was not oblivious to the critical developments in the North American settlements. The town regularly received London newspapers and other publications featuring stories about American unrest. Additionally, since it was a seaport, Portsmouth's merchants were well aware of colonial boycotts of British goods and of the destruction of East India tea in Boston harbour in 1773.[22] English seamen or crown officials, relieved at being done with their onerous royal duties in America, also conveyed further details of increasing American hostility.

Consequently, the people of Portsmouth probably were not surprised to learn in June 1775 of the April skirmishes at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts. The subsequent experiences of the conflict, and the colonists'


June 12. 1763.
Received of Mr. Tho.s Wren a Brief for the Colleges in America,
with the Sum of four pounds six Shillings and one
penny, the money collected on it,
John Cordrey
for Mr. Gabriel Mundy
24. 6. 1.
April 9. 1765.
Received of Mr Thomas Wren a brief for a Hail Storm
in the Co. of Sussex, with six Shillings collected on it.
0. 6. 0.
a Brief for Teignmouth, with four Shillings
2. 0

defiant Declaration of Independence (July 1776) undoubtedly were discussed and debated by townspeople and must have received at least passing references in sermons of the local clergy. Certainly, intensified naval activities in Portsmouth's dockyard throughout 1776 reflected the distant and deadly American war.[23]

Events in the following year brought the war even closer to the city. On 3 March 1777 Parliament adopted the controversial 'North's Act'. This legislation temporarily suspended *habeas corpus* for persons 'charged with or suspected of the crime of High Treasons committed in any of his Majesty's colonies or on the High Seas, or with the crime of Piracy'. The latter portion of this act was applied to captured rebels, many of whom were then packed on board guardships anchored in scattered English seaports.[24] But the increasing number of detainees in such makeshift, overcrowded gaols required new provisions by the government. Accordingly, on 8 May 1777, the Admiralty, with warrants prepared by His Majesty the previous month, ordered that two sites were to be established as 'Places of confinement for such Rebel Prisoners as may be brought to England from North America'. Also, on 8 May the Admiralty ordered that Americans confined on British naval vessels be delivered to the solicitor of the Admiralty or its designated representatives. Two prisons were to be prepared in England for accepting these captured Yankee rebels. One was Mill Prison situated in Devon between the town of Plymouth and Plymouth Dock. The other, Forton Prison, was located across Portsmouth Harbour, approximately a mile northwest of Gosport in the parish of Alverstoke.[25]

Administrative responsibility for both prisons also was established during 1777. As in earlier eighteenth-century conflicts, the secretaries of state and the lords of the Admiralty were the highest government agencies charged with primary authority over enemy naval captives. However, a subordinate body, the Commissioners for Sick and Hurt Seamen and the Exchange of Prisoners of War, acted as the principal intermediary between these two agencies. Though primarily responsible to the Admiralty, the Commissioners dispatched orders from their superiors to the directors of each gaol, normally with their own instructions for implementation.[26] The Commissioners in turn received reports from officials directly connected with each prison, and passed the reports on to their superiors. Each prison was to have a formal staffing that included an agent or keeper, a clerk, three turnkeys, two deputies, a steward, cooks, labourers (handymen) and a part-time surgeon. In addition, available military personnel or local militia were to serve as prison guards, usually ten sentinels at a time. Rewards for captured escapees, initially 10*s*. were raised to £5 in July 1777.[27]

Forton, which had served as a prison during the Seven Years War, contained rather ample facilities. It was built originally as a hospital during the reign of Queen Anne, though by the time of the colonial rebellion, Haslar Hospital, immediately south of Gosport, handled major medical matters. The prison itself consisted of two rather spacious buildings that could hold up to 2,000 inmates. During the American Revolution one building was used for 'under' (junior) officers and sailors, and one for higher officers. There was one airing ground between the buildings and another nearby 'on three quarters of an acre of level ground'. In December 1777 the Admiralty approved the construction of a shed on the airing ground which was open on all sides and under which seats were placed for the prisoners to sit during hot or sultry weather.[28]

Surrounding the prison area were eight-foot high pickets driven into the ground about two inches apart. In November 1777 the Commission for Sick and Hurt Seamen wrote to the Admiralty requesting that *cheveaux de*

A 'brief for the Colleges in America', 14 June 1763.
PCRO CHU 82/10/1.

frize (iron spikes) be placed on the walls of both buildings, but there is no indication that this was ever done. A map of the period indicates a small lake just east of Forton, farms, meadows, and woodlands on the other sides, and a single road leading south-east to the fortifications surrounding Gosport. Another road twisted northward through the small hamlet of Brockhurst before proceeding to Fareham. Gosport itself was a far smaller community than Portsmouth, though a printed guide of 1775 colourfully described it as 'a very neat town with a decent trade in it, the buildings are mostly good, and the inhabitants genteel'.[29]

The overall features of the Forton gaol and the fact that it was available must have made it an ideal facility for housing many of the increasing number of rebel maritime captives. In May 1777 the prison was ready for use, but its formal opening was briefly delayed by legal technicalities. These matters were soon resolved with assistance from Admiral Thomas Pye, Portsmouth's naval director, so that on 13 June 1777 the Commission for Sick and Hurt Seamen wrote to the Admiralty that Forton was ready to accept prisoners. That same day, the first American seamen were confined there and by November 1782 a total of more than 1,200 captured rebels had been listed on Forton's rosters.[30]

The American prisoners usually passed through Portsmouth on their way to Forton. While in the seaport, they were examined under guard by civil or crown magistrates and sometimes by Admiralty officials. The standard procedure of the examination was first to determine that the captives were detained Americans who had served on board armed vessels as stated by the Act of March 1777; next to issue warrants charging them with treason against His Majesty; and finally, to commit them to Forton Prison 'as Rebels and Pirates'.[31] Despite the ominous tone of such warrants, most of the prisoners were not mistreated during their commitment, and some of them even expressed relief at being sent to confinement on land. Jonathan Carpenter, a Massachusetts sailor and one of Forton's earliest inmates, wrote that he 'rejoiced at the opportunity to go to prison' and 'get clear from cruel masters' who commanded his guardship in the harbour. Caleb Foot, a later detainee also from New England, declared that leaving his prison ship for Forton 'was like coming out of Hell and going into Paradise'. Forton, however, was not intended to be a paradise, and following their examination and commitment, captured mariners were usually taken under heavy guard, ferried across Portsmouth harbour to Gosport, and from there marched again to confinement in the prison.[32]

Prison conditions were far from ideal for the first American inmates in 1777. Timothy Connor, among Forton's earliest captives, noted that for a day after he and his shipmates arrived on 13 June, they 'had nothing to eat but boiled cabbage, which was part of the officers' allowance'. The supply of provisions eventually improved, but the quality and quantity of food continued to be the subject of intermittent prisoner complaints. Clothing was another shortcoming; many of the early arrivals had had their possessions taken during their shipboard captivity, and some inmates arrived at Forton half naked. Nevertheless, it was not until November 1777 that the Commission for Sick and Hurt Seamen dispatched a petition to the Admiralty asking them to alleviate 'the great want of cloathing and of Shoes and Stockings amongst the prisoners'.[33]

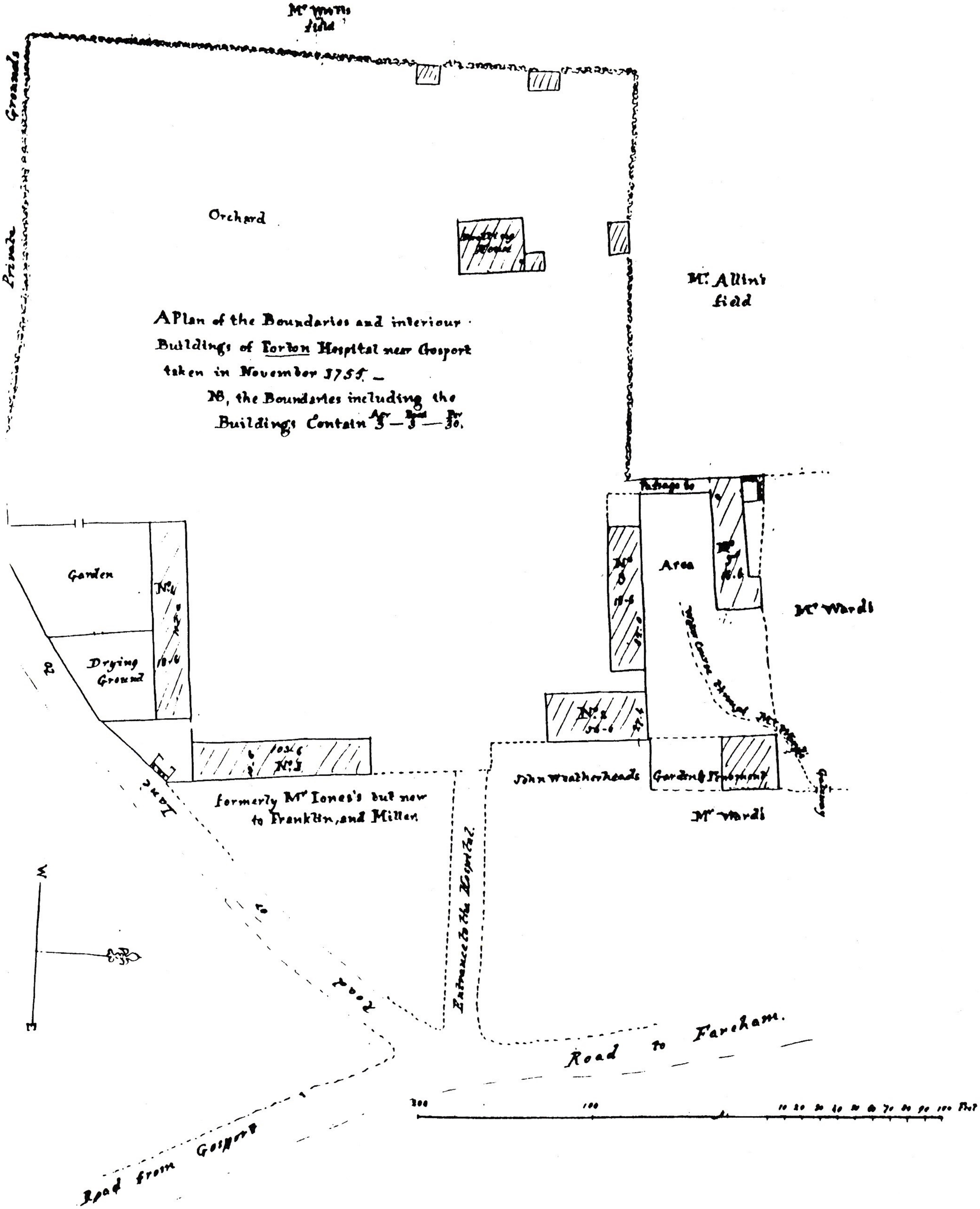
Forton's administrative regulations, like those at Mill Prison, were formulated by the Commission for Sick and Hurt Seamen, and they were expected to be strictly observed. Twelve rules were initially implemented. The first stated explicitly that 'the Directions of Keeper and Agent are to be obeyed without murmuring or endeavouring to raise any Discontent or Mutiny among the Prisoners; much less is any Prisoner to dare to offer any Menace or Insult by their action to the Keeper and Agent, or any action under him upon Pain of being put into closer Confinement and upon half Allowance provision or such other Punishment as the Case may deserve'. Subsequent regulations covered related disciplinary matters such as prison musters, damage to prison property, escape attempts, fighting, theft, personal health and cleanliness, and regular sweeping of the prison yard. And these ordinances also made provisions for the prisoners' mess that included a weekly 'Table of Victualing'. Such regulations were not excessively abusive and the Keeper even permitted a daily market at Forton's main gate where the captives could barter with farmers or tradesmen. Nevertheless, these restraints naturally sparked resentment among free-spirited sailors; refractory behaviour and resentment increased as internment lengthened.[34]

Forton's staff, who were to enforce these regulations, were frequently guilty of acts of corruption, petty or vindictive restrictions and unwarranted harassments. In August 1777 one rebel inmate alleged that John Newsham, the prison agent and keeper, forced three newly arrived naval officers to 'deliver up their money by the point of the bayonet'. Another prisoner referred to him as an 'old crab'. And indications of Newsham's general unpopularity among the detainees was contained in a letter dated 17 September 1777 from several American prisoners to the Admiralty charging Newsham with 'arbitrary and unwarrantable conduct'.[35]

Prisoners suffered from boredom, isolation, tedium and frustration. Their diaries expressed such sentiments, and part of a song written by Timothy Connor, one of the American prisoners, also reflects these moods:

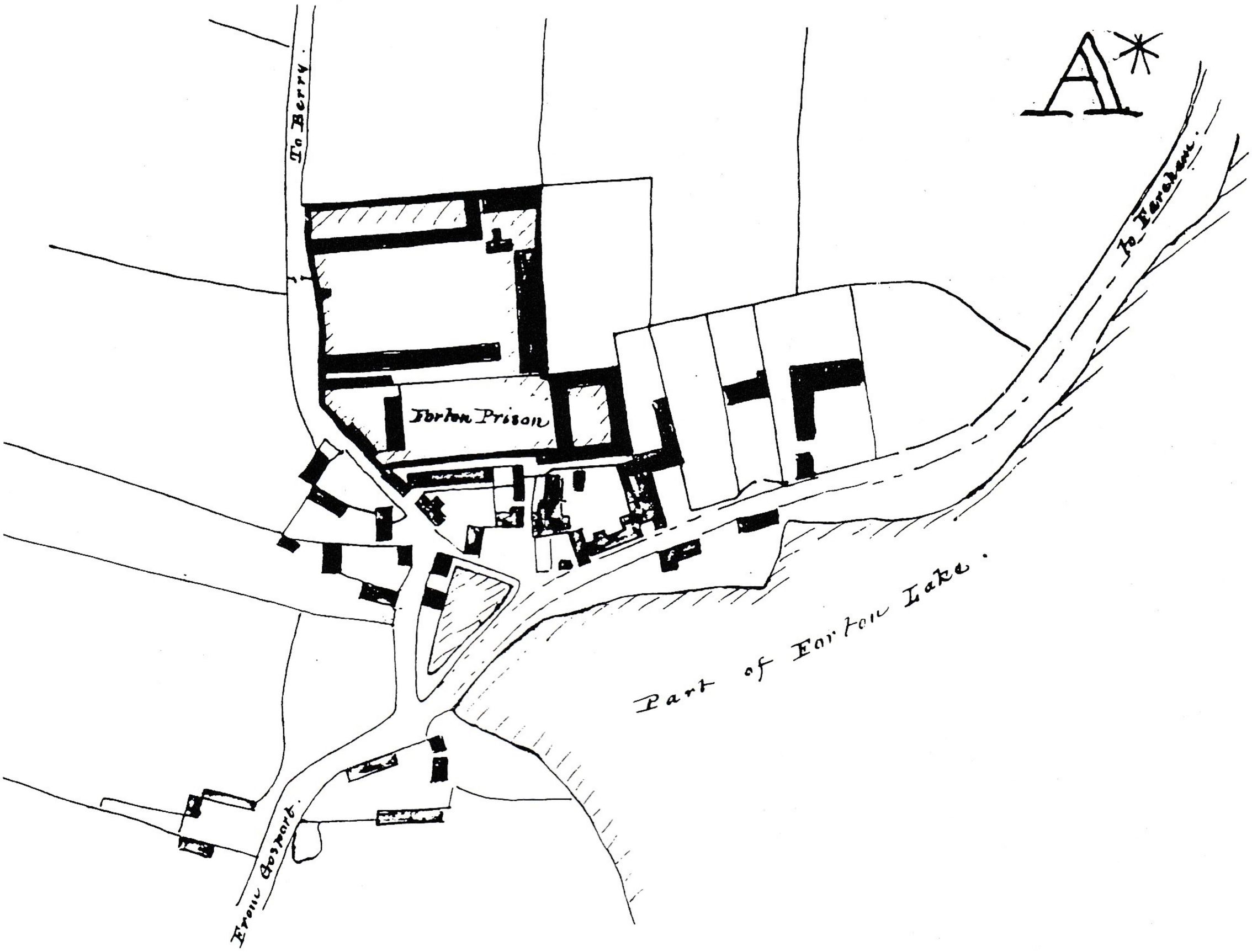
A Plan of the Boundaries and interiour Buildings of Forton Hospital near Gosport taken in November 1755 —

NB, the Boundaries including the Buildings Contain A. 5 — R. 3 — P. 30.



A plan of Forton Hospital in 1755 as copied by Richard Howlett from an original in the British Museum in 1860. Howlett Report 370A.
PCRO 684A/5/2.

*Forton Prison in 1782, as copied by Samuel B. Howlett from an original in the Inspector General of Fortification's Office in 1860. Howlett Report 370A**
PCRO 684A/5/2.

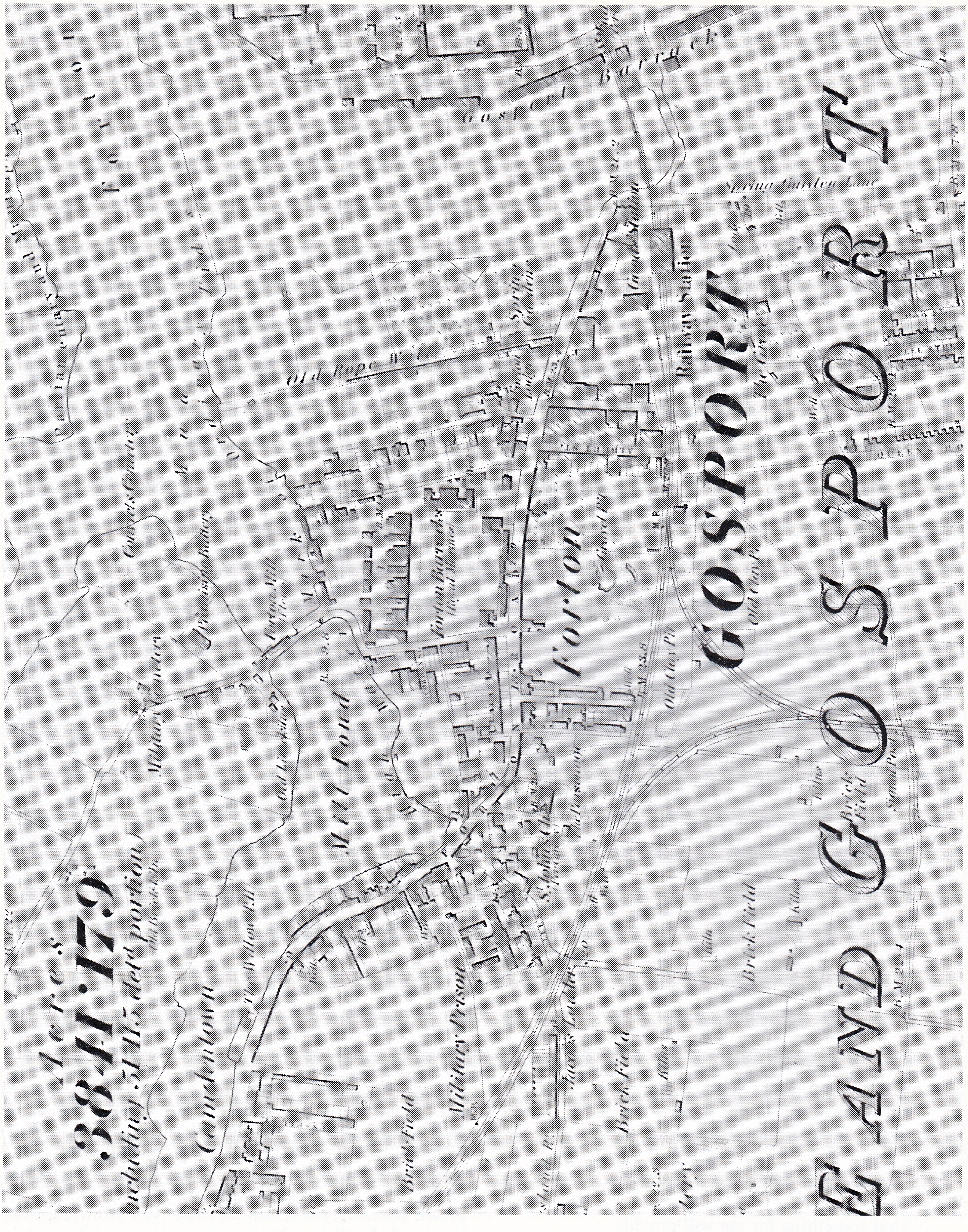


O now the cold winter comes on
And Forton runs hard by my side
For work at my trade I have none
And the best of my friends I have tried
Oh he that's a friend to himself
Will provide for a cold winter's day
That will serve him in time of his need
When the best of his friends are all flown . . .

By this experience I've learnt
And Forton runs hard by my side
For want of an Industrious Wife
That something for me will provide
O then I will tumble and toss
Till dinner time lie in my bed,
I would not care how soon I was wed.

Forton Prison, 17 Aug (1778)[36]

Residents of Portsmouth were quite aware of these incoming prisoners. The Yankee captives were frequently observed disembarking at the Royal Naval docks and marching to their arraignment. After their brief examinations and commitments, citizens could again see the prisoners being led to the Gosport ferry and from there to Forton confinement. For many Portsmouth inhabitants with royalist sympathies these colonial rebels were the objects of derision and scorn. For many other townspeople, they were a matter of curiosity. Several of those residents who had such feelings occasionally visited the prison site merely to scrutinize these New World captives. One such English onlooker was even heard to gasp in amazement, 'Why, Lord neighbours,' the Americans 'be white people; they talk just as us do, by my troth!'[37] However, for a few of Portsmouth's inhabitants, such as Thomas Wren, these prisoners soon became the object of


Forton
Parliamentary and Municipal
Mud
Ordinary Tides
Old Rope Walk
Spring Gardens
Gosport Barracks
Spring Garden Lane
Goods Station
Railway Station
GOSPORT
The Grove
Queens Ro
Convicts Cemetery
Forton Mill
Forton Barracks
(Royal Marines)
Forton
Gravel Pit
Old Clay Pit
Military Cemetery
Old Limekilns
Mill Pond
High Water
St. John's Ch.
The Parsonage
Brick Field
Kilns
Kiln
Signal Post
GOSPORT AND GOSPORT
Acres
3841·179
including 51·115 detd. portion
The Willow Pill
Camdentown
Military Prison
Jacobs Ladder
B.M. 22.4

Forton in 1870 from 6″ O.S. Sheet Hampshire LXXXII.

personal concern.

Quite likely, the Revd Mr Wren already had made some references to the American War in his sermons and he was not oblivious to the presence of these captured colonial rebels in his midst. Consequently, after this initial confinement of Americans, the Portsmouth minister began making regular visits to the prison, usually accompanied by a Gosport man named Mr Duckett. On one of these early calls, Wren became acquainted with officers from the prize ship, *Rising States*, and he gave them English currency in exchange for their unusable continental notes.[38] Exchanging currency apparently was the first form of financial assistance that agent Newsham permitted imprisoned rebels.

The Revd Mr Wren also appeared at confinement hearings for captured American sailors during the latter part of 1777. In September of that year his efforts helped to transmit to the Admiralty the prisoners' letter that alleged 'arbitrary and unlawful conduct' against Keeper Newsham. Also, following entreaties to royal officials, Wren was finally allowed to distribute small sums of his own money to detainees in special confinement. Concurrently, he solicited financial contributions through local friends and organizations, and sought donations of clothing and other personal necessities.[39]

By the close of 1777, sympathetic Englishmen from outside Portsmouth and Gosport, chiefly those associated with the pro-Americans of London, had bolstered Wren's efforts for prisoner relief. One such person was Thomas Digges, the son of a prominent Maryland landowner, who had been working in the London mercantile trade for several years past. Digges knew a number of Britons who supported the American cause, including the Revd Richard Price, a non-conformist acquaintance of Thomas Wren. Through these sources, Digges had learned of the privations facing the growing number of Americans at both Mill and Forton prisons, for in November 1777 he described their plight in a letter to Arthur Lee, one of the American Commissioners in Paris. Early the next month, Digges received an authorization from Lee to spend £50 for the prisoners' needs.[40]

Several peers, including Lord Abingdon, shared Thomas Digges' concern over the alleged maltreatment of American detainees. This prominent aristocrat had called for an investigation into prison conditions during a parliamentary speech on 1 December 1777. Abingdon then announced his intention to seek a subscription for prisoner relief from fellow members of the House of Lords. The pronouncement of this influential peer may have provided the needed impetus for such a campaign, for on the day before Christmas 1777, more than 100 persons met at the *King's Crown* tavern in Cornhill 'for the Purpose of relieving the Distresses of the American Prisoners'. The gathering, which was well publicized (but did not include Thomas Wren), resulted in pledges of almost £1,500 to a subscription for prisoner aid, and in the selection of a twenty-man committee to administer this fund. Fifteen days later the committee, which included Thomas Digges, four Members of Parliament, and four London aldermen, announced that the pledges had increased to over £3,700.[41]

Implementation of this subscription drive gave additional notoriety to Thomas Wren's endeavours, while simultaneously word of his activities at Forton was being sent to the American Commissioners in Paris. This information was conveyed in a letter dated 5–8 January 1778, from Major John Thornton, who previously had been dispatched by the Commissioners to investigate conditions at both Mill and Forton. Thornton's letter reported that Wren's activities were about the only heartening aspects of an otherwise dismal situation. According to Major Thornton, Wren had been 'of the greatest service and behaved with great Humanity to the American prisoners'. He noted in particular that 'this worthy clergyman' had visited the Americans at Forton every other day, supplied them 'from time to time with triflying (*sic*) sums', and had even got provisions delivered to inmates confined in the special punishment compound known as 'the black hole'.[42] Thornton's letter also declared that he had asked Wren to check an arrangement with Mrs Elizabeth Harrison, Forton's chief cook, to provide officers 'with a joint of meat' every other day. The major concluded by stating that the public announcement of the subscription of the American prisoners had already produced several sympathetic inquiries and pledges, and he indicated that many more donations would soon follow. In fact, a few days after this letter was completed, it was announced that the subscription was closing after reaching the impressive sum of £3,815 17*s*. 10*d*.[43]

The success of the subscription drive provided Wren and Duckett with the additional tasks of receiving and distributing the monies raised. At Forton, where administrative rule was now becoming more benevolent, Thomas Wren began a regular distribution of his portion of the bounties that had been collected. Individual allotments for the period from February 1778 until June 1779 apparently averaged about 1*s*. 2*d*. per week for common sailors and double this sum for officers.[44] From June 1779 until early 1781 all of the prisoners received continually decreasing assistance from a second, less bountiful, subscription fund. Food rations, especially meat, generally improved in both quantity and quality. Although there were sporadic complaints about meals at Forton, food rations were never as bad as those at Mill prison where a report in August 1777 stated that the inmates alleged they

Portsmouth from Gosport
W. TURNER

Portsmouth from Gosport by W. Turner, c1813.

were served 'Necks of Beef with maggots'. Wren and his assistant, Mr Duckett, also distributed warm clothing to alleviate the effects of the damp, chilly Hampshire winter, and they dispensed personal items such as tobacco, medicines, books, tea and writing supplies to inmates who often lacked funds for purchasing them at the prison market.[45]

Meanwhile, working from France, the American Commissioners were becoming more involved in the relief activities of sympathetic Britons. In October 1777, Benjamin Franklin had written to David Hartley, an old friend and an anti-war Member of Parliament for Kingston upon Hull, requesting that he distribute two or three hundred pounds to needy American captives. On 3 February 1778, Hartley informed Dr Franklin of the work accomplished by the prisoner relief committee and noted that, according to the doctor's wishes, he had recently advanced Mr Wren, 'a very worthy man', £50 in order to provide special dinners for the officers at Forton. Furthermore, he declared that if Franklin would send him an additional £100 this supplementary meal programme could be extended for another eight to ten weeks.[46] Nine days later Dr Franklin replied to Hartley thanking him for so 'readily engaging in the means of relieving our poor captives, and the pains you have taken and the advances you have made for that purpose'. He enclosed the £100 that Hartley had requested and added, 'I much approve of Mr Wren's prudent as well as benevolent conduct in the Disposition of the Money; and wish him to continue doing what shall appear to him and you to be right, which I am persuaded will appear the same to me and my colleagues here. I beg you will present him, when you write him my respectful acknowledgments . . .'[47]

Franklin's compliments, and more importantly his remittance, were gratefully received by Wren, who was then hard pressed to maintain the supplementary officers' messes. On 7 February 1778, he had written to David Hartley that Mrs Harrison's 'patience and credit are near exhausted', and that her husband had advised her to stop making these supplementary food purchases. Wren had promised to pay the cook her £10 10*s*. the following Monday which should provide Hartley with more time to obtain funds. Seventeen days later Franklin's payment at last arrived and Wren modestly replied to commendations from the American Commissioners: 'The regards and acknowledgements of such persons form the most ample recompense that my imagination can reach.'[48]

Soon afterwards, it became necessary to modify this special food programme. On 25 March 1778, Wren wrote directly to Franklin asking permission to draw from the remainder of the £100 remittance in order to reimburse Mrs Harrison. He also noted that he had advised the American officers of the limited funds available for continuing their supplementary messes, and the consequent need for frugality. In response to this assessment, the officers had decided that instead of paying the higher costs of food preparation they would rather receive weekly cash allotments, 'and so to manage *the sum* granted as to make it go as far as possible'. Thus, by the beginning of April Wren was dispensing an additional three shillings a week to the officers at Forton, and reporting his expenditures to Hartley.[49]

Monetary payments to the prisoners, however, remained a chronic problem. On 13 May 1778, Wren wrote to Hartley that 'he was sorely in want of more cash', and had been obliged to use £21 10*s*. of his own money. The clergyman added that he might be able to obtain further funds from Sir John Carter, his close friend and most prominent parishioner. Sir John, a wealthy brewer, magistrate, and recent mayor of Portsmouth, held strong pro-American anti-ministerial sentiments which he did not hesitate to voice. Already in December 1777, he had written to David Hartley concerning 'the sorry state of these American prisoners' and he offered his utmost assistance. But Sir John's cash donations, along with those of other Portsmouth sympathizers, proved insufficient so that Wren ultimately had to rely on sources in London and in France. His appeals were eventually answered, and most of the food and regular monetary grants continued with occasional interruptions and in lesser amounts throughout the remainder of the war.[50]

Providing financial assistance was the primary but not the only, way in which the Revd Mr Wren helped the Americans at Forton. He consistently strove to provide needed items such as medicine and clothing, often using his own limited income. One prisoner wrote that when subscriptions were temporarily depleted, Wren 'used to go round the neighbourhoods to beg clothing and money for us'. Within Forton's confines Wren endeavoured to alleviate the monotony and frustrations of prison life. He offered spiritual comfort to prisoners; he encouraged the organization of regular schooling in reading, writing, navigation and arithmetic; and most importantly, he became a source of reports, messages, and news from the outside world. Usually, Wren had no difficulty in bringing such information to the eager prisoners, although in November 1778 he complained that Keeper Newsham, citing Admiralty orders, had forbidden him to deliver a letter to the American officers from the Commissioners in Paris. After some discussion, however, Wren was allowed to transmit verbally the contents of this letter, regarding a possible prisoner exchange, to the anxious inmates.[51]

Several prisoners at Forton kept accounts of their captivity in which they noted the charitable work of their

Portsmouth benefactor. The narratives of inmates Charles Bulkeley and Elisha Hinman of Connecticut and Luke Matthewman of New York mention Wren's assistance.[52] More detailed descriptions of Wren's work appeared in the lengthier journals of Nathaniel Fanning, Jonathan Carpenter, George Thompson, and Timothy Connor. Fanning recalled with particular gratitude Wren's regular visits to dispense money, supplies, and wartime information. He also stated that whenever any disgruntled prisoners would berate the minister for not meeting all their demands, Wren would answer soothingly, 'have a little patience my children, and I will endeavour to bring you the next time I come whatever you are in need of'. Timothy Connor, who was confined in Forton from June 1777 until his exchange two years later, kept the most extensive prison diary. Connor not only cited the clergyman's welcome distribution of supplies and subscription monies, but he also emphasized the optimistic manner in which Wren kept alive the inmates' hopes for being freed from Forton.[53]

One of the means by which these rebel mariners could leave their prison was by abandoning the patriotic cause and voluntarily joining the service of King George III. The English army, and more especially the Royal Navy, were usually agreeable, often eager, to accept imprisoned seamen who were willing to apply for an official pardon and switch their allegiance. Consequently recruiters, especially those from the naval service, frequently sought to entice the prisoners into applying for pardons. The pardons were issued by the Admiralty under the monarch's seal. The pardons also specifically stated that the paroled prisoners were being released for the purpose of entering His Majesty's service, and that prison officials were to see that these men were 'delivered over to such person or persons as shall be duly authorized to receive them for the Purpose aforesaid'. As the war dragged on, perhaps endlessly to many of the prisoners, the records of the Admiralty and the Commission for Sick and Hurt Seamen reveal that many inmates of Mill and Forton chose this route from captivity.[54]

But the percentage of prisoners who chose defection was relatively low. Historians have estimated that the overall rate of defection was less than ten per cent at both Mill and Forton. Furthermore, it was evident that many of these turncoat prisoners were actually 'Old Countrymen' who were born in Britain or Ireland, while others had simply opted for this course as an easy means of escape. Resolute patriot sentiments as well as the fact that the volunteers had to wait for their pardon before leaving Forton also had an effect. Thus Admiral Sir William Pye suggested in a letter to Sick and Hurt Seamen (5 June 1781) that the delays in volunteers receiving their pardons 'exposed them to the Resentment of other Prisoners who threatened the lives of those who offer to serve in the Navy and prevent many from entering'.[55] It is also likely that the cheerful and optimistic reports concerning repatriation brought during Thomas Wren's visits helped to reduce the number of changelings.

Prisoners' exchange agreements were another way in which Yankee captives might leave their British gaols. These exchange agreements, or cartels, were a common practice during 18th-century European wars, but the fact that the American prisoners in effect were considered traitors by Parliamentary legislation, and not regular combatants, altered their status. Thus, Benjamin Franklin, representing the American Commissioners in Paris, had no success in his initial efforts to obtain any exchange agreement. Lord Stormont, Britain's ambassador in Paris, reflected his government's intransigence in April 1777 when he returned a message from Dr Franklin and disdainfully declared, 'The King's ambassador receives no applications from rebels unless they come to implore his Majesty's mercy'.[56]

However, by early 1778 significant new developments made the British government more receptive on the question of prisoner exchanges. Publication in *The London Chronicle* of Lord Stormont's obstinacy on this issue had caused vigorous protests from the anti-war opposition. Also, Lord North's efforts at colonial reconciliation and France's formal entry into the war further weakened the government's intransigent position.[57]

Nevertheless, negotiations between Franklin and British officials dragged on slowly with both sides blaming each other for delays. Franklin now had to reconcile his actions with his French allies and their own prisoner considerations. Finally, in December 1778, England agreed to an exchange procedure and, in the following March, 100 Americans were sent to France from Mill Prison. In June 1779, 119 Americans followed from Forton, reportedly 'receiving the joy and gifts of the people as they passed through Gosport'. England had insisted that these captives were to be exchanged only for British prisoners in France in units of one hundred and, since Franklin lacked prisoners to exchange, the next transfer of Americans waited until March 1780. Problems resulted anew from this exchange so that the further release of Americans was halted until March 1782 when Parliament finally acknowledged that captured Americans were in fact prisoners of war. The following month, the Admiralty ordered all of these captives to be sent to North America for exchange, and by July 1782 more than 1,000 American prisoners had left England for home.[58]

Thomas Wren had become particularly involved in the delicate manoeuvring that preceded the first prisoner

Royal Pardon for Thomas Kinsey and Thomas Farris on condition they enter and continue to serve in the Royal Navy.
N(ational) M(aritime) M(useum) ADM/M.

George R.

Whereas Thomas Kinsey and Thomas Farris are now confined in Forton Prison in our County of Hants on Suspicion of High Treason for having acted contrary to the Faith and Allegiance due to Us, and for having been guilty of several illegal Practices upon the High Seas; and Whereas upon humble application made to Us thereunto moving We have thought fit to extend Our Grace and Mercy unto them, to grant them Our Pardon, and to discharge them from their said Imprisonment, on Condition of their respectively entering and continuing to serve Us in Our Royal Navy. Our Will and Pleasure therefore is that You cause them the said Thomas Kinsey and Thomas Farris to be respectively delivered over to such person or persons as shall be duely authorized to receive them for the Purpose aforesaid. And for so doing, This shall

Thomas Kinsey and Thomas Farris; Pardon, on Condition of entering and continuing to serve in the Royal Navy.

be

exchange. In early 1778, the spokesmen for the Americans at Forton, with the clergyman's help, had drawn up petitions to the Admiralty requesting an exchange. A copy was sent through Wren to David Hartley in London with the expectation that he would use his political influence on their behalf. In a letter to Hartley (18 March 1778) that accompanied the petitions, Wren endorsed the prisoners' aspirations stating, 'I trust sir that you will give these petitions such direction and weight that these poor men may soon see their native country'. Two months later, as the captives' hopes increased, he wrote to Hartley again, asking if he had any 'intelligence respecting their exchange'. He added that while the prisoners lately 'had been tolerably patient and quiet ... it is not without the most laborious and repeated efforts that Mr Duckett and myself keep them up to their degree of confinement'.[59]

By the autumn of 1778, Wren and Mr Duckett had to exert even more efforts to sustain the Americans' patience and hopes for exchange. That October, Wren was somehow able to get a letter read to the Forton prisoners from Benjamin Franklin and the American Commissioners which stated that a cartel exchange was settled, and a 'Passport vessel would soon take them to Nantes or L'Orient'. Wren followed this encouraging letter from France by pressing David Hartley for further information that would bolster the captives' morale. On 4 November 1778, Hartley replied to the minister that the transfer agreement was imminent. Two weeks later, Wren informed Hartley that he had passed the good news on to the prisoners, and that he now expected that 'the exchange of Prisoners will speedily take place'.[60] In fact, the final resolution remained protracted and the Admiralty reprimanded Keeper Newsham for allowing Franklin's letter to be read to the prisoners. Evidence of prisoners' reactions to these ongoing postponements was an increase in escape attempts and a defiance of prison regulations. Newsham reflected the latter situation when he wrote to the Commission for Sick and Hurt Seamen in January 1779 of the 'refractory behaviour of the prisoners', and the 'need to restrain many of them from committing acts of violence'. Consequently, the autumn and winter of 1778–9 was a critical period in Wren's continuous and laborious work at Forton. Yet somehow he was able to mollify much of the captives' bitterness and restiveness until the promulgation of the initial prisoner cartel in 1779.[61]

Thomas Wren continued to work closely with his friend David Hartley on the problem of prisoner exchange just as he had done for prisoner relief. He dispatched lists of the Forton inmates who were selected for exchange; he passed on news about further cartel negotiations; and he reported through Hartley to the American Commissioners on the general health and mood of the remaining captives. During the autumn of 1779, Wren regretfully informed Hartley that the valuable assistance of his Gosport companion, Mr Duckett, would no longer be available. On 4 October 1779, he wrote that his 'very useful and worthy Colleage at Forton for nearly two years is about to move to Esher to live after the entreaties of his uncles who are wealthy and intelligent farmers there'. Wren accordingly settled Duckett's accounts, and thereafter acted alone as the prisoners' benefactor, advisor, and spokesman until the last prisoner exchange in 1783.[62]

Supporting cartel agreements was only one way in which Thomas Wren assisted American prisoners in attaining their freedom. Although it was little known in England during the American Revolution, the Portsmouth parson, supported by sympathetic Englishmen, had a hand in abetting several successful escapes from the prison.

Attempted escapes from Forton began almost simultaneously with the initial confinement of Americans. Timothy Connor reported in his journal on 19 June 1777, 'our people made a large hole through the wall of the prison and eleven men made their escape'. Six days later, Keeper Newsham reported that the fugitives had all been returned, but the fact that the prisoners had been able to flee despite a sentinel on duty, prompted an Admiralty order that security be inspected and tightened.[63] This mandate, however, proved of little avail. During Connor's two years of captivity (1777–9), he estimated that 112 of 413 prisoners had broken out of Forton, and British records from June 1777 up to and including April 1782, listed 536 attempted escapes, considerably more than those at Mill Prison. These endeavours included individual flights, as well as mass breakouts. Administrative actions, such as replacing guards and turnkeys, extending the prison fencing, and in July 1777 raising the reward for captured fugitives to £5, proved to have little deterrence. The prisoners dug tunnels (including one from the prison privy); they jumped the eight-foot prison pickets and dug under the fences; they bribed or tricked corrupt, ill-trained or incompetent guards; and in a few cases they feigned serious illness in order to obtain transfer to the less protected Haslar Hospital. Punishment for recaptured fugitives, forty days in the Black Hole at half-rations plus relegation to the bottom of the exchange list, was apparently not too serious a deterrent. Furthermore, Forton itself was less secure than Mill Prison and the area immediately outside the Gosport prison was more conducive for hiding than the Plymouth gaol. Moreover, guards at both Forton and Mill had no standing orders to fire at fleeing inmates. Therefore, escape must have seemed more feasible and attractive than a frustrating and tedious wait for exchange.[64]

Copy correspondence relating to American prisoners at Forton who had escaped, 1779.
P(ublic) R(ecord) O(ffice) ADM 98/11.

pleased to take such steps as they judge proper for procuring his Pardon. We are,

Sir, Your most humble Serv.ts
W.R. R.L.

Sir,
Hon.ble Philip Stephens Esq.r
Whe...

Office &c. the 13.th March 1782

Our Agent at Forton Prison having transmitted to Us the descriptions of 13 American Prisoners who escaped from thence the 11.th or 12.th Instant, We herewith enclose Copy thereof agreeable to the directions of the R.t Hon.ble the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty as signified to Us by your Letter of the 11.th September 1778, and We desire you will please to acquaint their Lordships that We are taking measures at London and Margate for their Recapture. We are,

Sir, Your most humble Servants
W.R. R.L. H.M. J.W.

Names	Age	Stature	Complexion	How made	Hair	What Clothing
Reuben Palmer	23	5.7	palish	slight	long brown	blue Jacket & white Waistcoat.
Thomas Morton	17	5.6	dark	middle	short brown	blue Jacket and Waistcoat.
Mann.l Richardson	23	5.10	fairish	middle	long brown	blue Jacket and Waistcoat.
Thomas Russell	32	5.8	dark	stout	short dark	light coloured Coat and Waistcoat.
John Lockhart	20	5.7	fair	slight	short light	light Coloured Jacket and Waistcoat.
Thomas Lockhart	18	5.6	fair	slight	short light	blue Jacket and Waistcoat.
William Grant	26	5.10	darkish	middle	long dark	blue Jacket and Waistcoat.
Isaac Allen	30	5.7	dark	stout	short black	blue Jacket and Waistcoat.
Daniel Edwards	26	5.8	dark	middle	short dark	blue Jacket & whitish Waistcoat.
Rich.d Coggeshall	23	5.7	fair	middle	long light	brown Jacket and Waistcoat.
Robert Fulton	40	5.5	dark	stout	short dark	lightish coloured Jacket and Waistcoat.
Simon Crandell	22	5.9	fair	middle	long brown	blue Jacket and Red Waistcoat.
And.w Lepear	19	5.7	fair	slight	long dark	brown Coat Waistcoat & Breeches.

Sir John Carter (knighted 1773) from the original in Portsmouth City Museum and Art Gallery.

Despite these inviting circumstances, plus the fact that many local residents were corruptible, escape from Forton and from England was not without danger and difficulty. Although guards had no orders to shoot fleeing inmates, they had live ammunition and some did fire at escapees. Informers inside the prison also warned the keeper of inmate plans. Thus, in August 1781, John Newsham notified his superiors that he had used such informants to learn 'that the Prisoners at Forton have a hole nearly finished whereby a number mean to sign on some vessel and make for the coast of France'. And the improvement of physical security, beginning in early 1778, while far from foolproof, at least made escape from the prison more difficult than before.[65]

Other obstacles remained for prisoners who somehow effected their escape from Forton's immediate confines. Descriptions of fugitive prisoners were distributed to local magistrates, military commanders, and the Commission for Sick and Hurt Seamen. These descriptions not only benefited English sheriffs and justices but also local civilians called 'five pounders' who were awarded that generous sum for returning any of the escapees. Some prisoners actually worked in collusion with these civilians for a free evening outside Forton plus a little extra money for themselves. The practice became so prevalent that in 1782 the Admiralty ordered that rewards for escapees be reduced to their original 10 shilling sum. Still, most of the Yankee captives who were attempting to flee England had to be concerned about bounty hunters and their tracking dogs.[66] Added to all this was the fact that most of the fugitives were hampered by a lack of knowledge of secure travel routes and needed suitable clothing, money and personal identification.

And assistance for overcoming these obstacles became available through sources outside the prison. The difficulty in recapturing many of the prisoners and the news that several American fugitives had actually reached safety in France soon convinced English officials that the fugitives had received some illicit support. Reports to the Admiralty and the Commission for Sick and Hurt Seamen confirmed the existence of such unlawful assistance. On 20 July 1778 a letter to the Admiralty noted that prisoners 'who can get money will not long remain prisoners' and that 'there are friends who aren't far from Portsmouth who can assist their endeavours'. On 29 September of the following year, six justices wrote to the Admiralty from Fareham that 'the fugitives are known to have many friends in the Neighbourhood who take every occasion of giving them protection and assistance'.[67] More oblique references concerning illegal help were contained in communications by loyal subjects in Hampshire, but crown officials were unable to identify the specific sources of such help.

If magistrates had investigated this matter carefully, they might have uncovered a link between the successful escapes and the Revd Thomas Wren and his Portsmouth associates. Indeed, it was Wren's chapel at the top of the High Street that often served as the first stop in a freedom trip for those who were able to slip out of Forton and evade the avaricious 'five pounders' or the military patrols. In his chapel Wren, along with supportive townsmen, offered sanctuary to the fugitives who had crossed Portsmouth harbour. There these Americans were provided with the necessary means, and sometimes personal escorts, for the critical journey to London. Once in London, the escapees almost invariably went to Wren's friend, Thomas Digges, who lived at No. 23 Villiers Street, Strand. At Digges' home, and sometimes at the residence of Dr George Williams, another pro-American advocate, the escapees from both Forton and Mill were concealed until they received money and means of transportation to the continent. By June 1782, Digges claimed to have aided more than 160 fugitives. However, this assertion, as well as Digges' earlier claim that the burden of helping these Americans had put him under 'extreme financial difficulties', was somewhat exaggerated.[68]

Portsmouth residents assisting the secretive and illicit activities of Thomas Wren evidently were led by Sir John Carter, whose home in the High Street was almost opposite the Presbyterian chapel, behind which, in St Thomas's Street, according to one prisoner, Wren's own residence was said to be. Carter was well known for his vigorous opposition to the American War, and along with fellow merchants and communicants Thomas and William White and Timothy Pike, he waged political battles with the faction then controlling Portsmouth's municipal government. Such Whiggishness naturally produced a strong affinity for and eagerness to assist the Forton prisoners. Some of Carter's help, as previously noted, came through his financial donations to Thomas Wren. However, it is likely that Carter, and perhaps his political associates, were accessories to the sanctuary and support Wren provided American escapees. The proximity of his home to the Presbyterian chapel, where he was a communicant, would have made it difficult to avoid having knowledge of any secret activities there, and he and his associates were the logical source of funds that Wren provided for travel expenses to London safe houses.[69]

No written acknowledgement can be found concerning the roles of Sir John Carter or Thomas Wren in aiding these escapes, but Wren's actions alone were noted by others. John Thornton, in his letter to the American Commissioners in January 1778, wrote that in addition to his benevolences for the American prisoners Mr Wren had been 'providing some with the means of making their

The Carter family's home, No 18, High Street. It stood almost opposite the Unitarian Chapel.
PCRO 1330A/2/1.

escapes'. Later, in November 1780, Thomas Digges wrote to Franklin that 'numbers have reduced lately owing to the exertions of a very worthy little agent; numbers having found their way to a certain house in Amster(da)m' (a reference to the High Street chapel's Dutch architecture).[70] Successful escapees also wrote of Wren's assistance. Captain Elisha Hinman mentioned Wren's help after he had bribed his way out of prison. Seaman George Thompson noted that after he and another inmate had made their escapes from Forton, Wren had provided them with a safe hideaway and additional clothing until a way out of England was arranged. Captain of Marines Alexander Dick and several companions broke out of confinement in September 1778, and Wren gave them temporary refuge before clandestinely directing them to Thomas Digges and their subsequent liberation. Lieutenant Luke Matthewman reported that after he and Captain John Smith had tunnelled their way to freedom in late 1780, they 'went to Portsmouth where we received instructions from our good friend Dr Wren how to proceed'. Lieutenant Nathaniel Fanning was not an escapee, but in 1783 he too described the 'extra-legal' assistance offered by Wren. Fanning appropriately commented that such assistance 'ought to be universally known in the United States'.[71]

Indeed, with the close of the American Revolution, action was taken recognizing Wren's various endeavours. In February 1780 a letter from Benjamin Franklin to the Portsmouth clergyman offered an early indication of American gratitude:

> Reverend Sir:
>
> Your great attention to the wants of our poor captive countrymen and your kind and charitable care of them in their sicknesses and other distresses I have often heard spoke of by such as have escaped and passed through this place, in the strongest terms of grateful acknowledgement. I beg you accept among the rest, my sincere and hearty thanks, and my best wishes for your health and prosperity.[72]

Later, on 22 July 1783, Franklin cited Wren's contributions in a letter to Robert R. Livingston, head of the Confederation Congress's Department of Foreign Affairs, and added: 'I wish the Congress would enable me to make a present and that some of our universities would confer upon him the degree of Doctor'. The following 25 September, three weeks after the signing of the Peace of Paris, a congressional resolution was initiated to thank Wren and award him a gift of £500. Apparently Congress had second thoughts about the financial gift, for the approved resolution of 29 September merely voted that 'the thanks of Congress be given to the Reverend Doctor Wren for his humane and benevolent attention to the citizens of these United States who were prisoners at Portsmouth in Great Britain during the war'[73]

A few weeks after this laudatory congressional resolve, Thomas Wren was sent word of the second honour that Franklin had suggested to Livingston. Contact had been made with Elias Boudinot, President of the Confederation Congress, and a trustee of the College of New Jersey.

Boudinot evidently had little difficulty persuading this Presbyterian College to award a Presbyterian minister a degree, especially with the added endorsements of Franklin and Livingston. Thus, on 1 November 1783, Boudinot wrote to Franklin informing him of the college's award of an honorary doctorate to Wren. Boudinot also included a copy of the diploma and a letter written to the 'Rev'd Dr Wren' mentioning his acts of 'Benevolence and Humanity' to the American prisoners and concluding: 'It adds Sir to my happiness on this Occasion to enclose a Diploma from the University in this Place of which I have the honor of being a trustee conferring on you the Degree of Doctor of Divinity which I hope you will favor us with the acceptance of as an additional Evidence of the respect of this grateful country.'[74]

The honorary degree citation that followed the name of the Revd Thomas Wren was simply worded: 'Voted the Thanks of the Continental Congress in 1783 for services to American Prisoners at Portsmouth Eng.' Although the Princeton award failed to amplify what services had been performed, it did provide the Portsmouth parson with a unique niche in the annals of American history. Wren had become the first Englishman to receive an honorary degree from an American college since the outbreak of the American Revolution. The award was granted at Princeton's September 1783 commencement ceremonies – the same month that the Treaty of Paris acknowledged the independence of the United States.[75] Perhaps the two events even held an unseen connection, since the Revd Mr Wren's degree also might symbolize those common and kindred ties that would continue to bind these two separate nations.

On 10 December 1783, Franklin sent Congress's resolution of thanks, the College of New Jersey's diploma, and Boudinot's letter to Thomas Wren by way of a mutual friend, Dr William Hodgson of London. Hodgson had served on the prisoner relief committee and had assisted Franklin in arranging exchanges of wartime captives. Two months later, Dr Wren replied to Boudinot in a modest and gracious manner:

Portsmouth, 12 February 1784

Honorable Sir,

I have had the honour to receive your very obliging letter of the 1st November last, which enclosed a Vote of thanks of the Honourable the Congress of the United States of America, and a Diploma of Doctor in Divinity from the College of New Jersey.

The sentiments which you are pleased to express on this occasion assure me Sir, that I may take the liberty to request, that you will present to the Honourable Congress, in a better manner than I am able to do my most grateful acknowledgements for the distinguished honour they have done me. I receive this testimony of their approbation with the highest sense of their condescending and generous regards. It is the pure result of their own goodness; For tho' I was determined to do everything in my power for the relief of their captives, yet were not my efforts equal to my wishes. All possible assistance to men suffering so deeply, and in such a cause, appeared to me, to be in the strictest sense, my duty. And as the impulse of that humanity which I feel, the attachment to that liberty which I adore and the desire of succoring oppressed innocence, never obtained full gratification. I am the more affected with the acknowledgement of that Honourable body over which you preside. Their Vote of thanks to me, also acquires additional value, as it is the Act of men who had spirit equal to the defense of their rights, and perseverence sufficient for the emancipation of their country. Such honours no other men can confer. Such honours no other men possess.

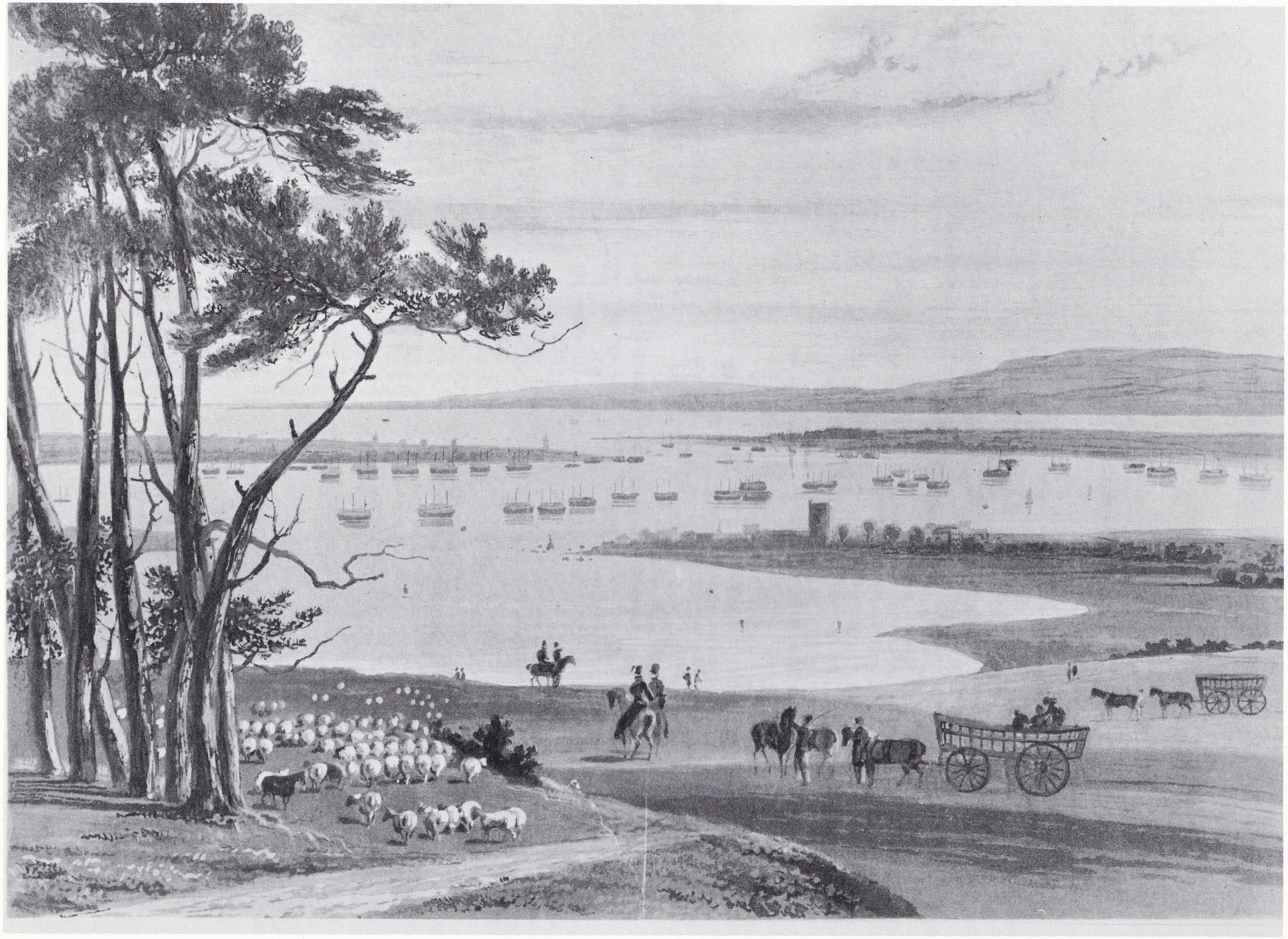
I pray the favour of you Sir to convey the enclosed to the President of the College of Princeton. And permit me Sir to add that I esteem myself greatly obliged by the polite and friendly manner in which you have communicated to me these high and undeserved regards of your country.

May your country, Sir be the Seat of freedom, the region of virtue and prosperity, and the asylum of the oppressed for ever.

With Sincere respect and esteem
I have the honour to be
Honourable Sir
Your very obliged and humble Servant
Thomas Wren[76]

Thomas Wren never saw the small New Jersey college that awarded him this honorary doctorate. Following the end of the American Revolution, he continued to preach at the High Street Chapel. He maintained a correspondence with some of those individuals in England who had helped him with the prisoner relief, and with some former American captives.[77]

Apparently, Wren also was in touch with Henry Laurens, an American peace commissioner, and he may have met John Adams, the first United States ambassador to Great Britain. In the former instance, Laurens wrote to Robert R. Livingston in Philadelphia on 17 July 1783, noting that 'Doctor (Richard) Price and the Reverend Mr Wren of Portsmouth' had strongly recommended four Englishmen 'as Settlers and Citizens in the United States'.



A view from Portsdown Hill, 1823. This view gives some indication of the local terrain. Forton lay across Portsmouth Harbour roughly opposite the town of Portsea.

Laurens at the time was in Bath seeking relief from a chronic illness, and perhaps became acquainted with one of these ministers during his convalescence in England.[78]

John Adams had known for several years about Thomas Wren's pro-American activities and sympathies when on 21 April 1787 he responded promptly to a possibly portentous message from the minister. The American ambassador wrote that he wished to learn more about a suspicious individual whom Wren said had been jailed in Portsmouth, allegedly for attempting to counterfeit American currency. Wren replied to Adams on 22 April describing a mysterious Scotsman calling himself John Muir who had arrived in London the previous January by ship from Charleston, South Carolina. The man, dressed as 'a common seaman', had subsequently taken up residence in Portsmouth where he had approached Walter Mowbray, a well-known local printer, seeking to have him 'print off a thousand copies of Carolina notes'. Muir also allegedly had type plates, stamps, and printing paper for Mowbray's use. However, the suspicious printer informed the mayor, then Sir John Carter, who had Muir arrested and remanded to the town gaol. Wren's letter to Ambassador Adams added that Muir had been quite circumspect during his questioning; that he probably was not a common American seaman; that he apparently had confederates in London; and that a large 'number and variety of notes of the United States were in his possession'.[79]

This letter, followed by a similar message from Walter Mowbray, apparently aroused John Adams's suspicions. Shortly thereafter, the Ambassador travelled to Portsmouth where he held a fruitless interview with Muir whom he described as 'suitable to any kind of atrocious villainy'. Although Adams was unable to report any widespread counterfeiting plot in England, he was undoubtedly grateful for the Portsmouth minister's continued friendly assistance to America. On 25 June 1787, Adams wrote to Wren that for lack of the detection of further evidence, he concurred with 'Sir John Carter that it will be most prudent to release Muir on his own recognizance'. The final mention of this puzzling incident came seventeen days later when Wren wrote to the American ambassador suggesting that a better course of action might be to allow Muir to be held for trial until the quarter sessions on 23 July and then be speedily acquitted, not as innocent, but for want of evidence.[80]

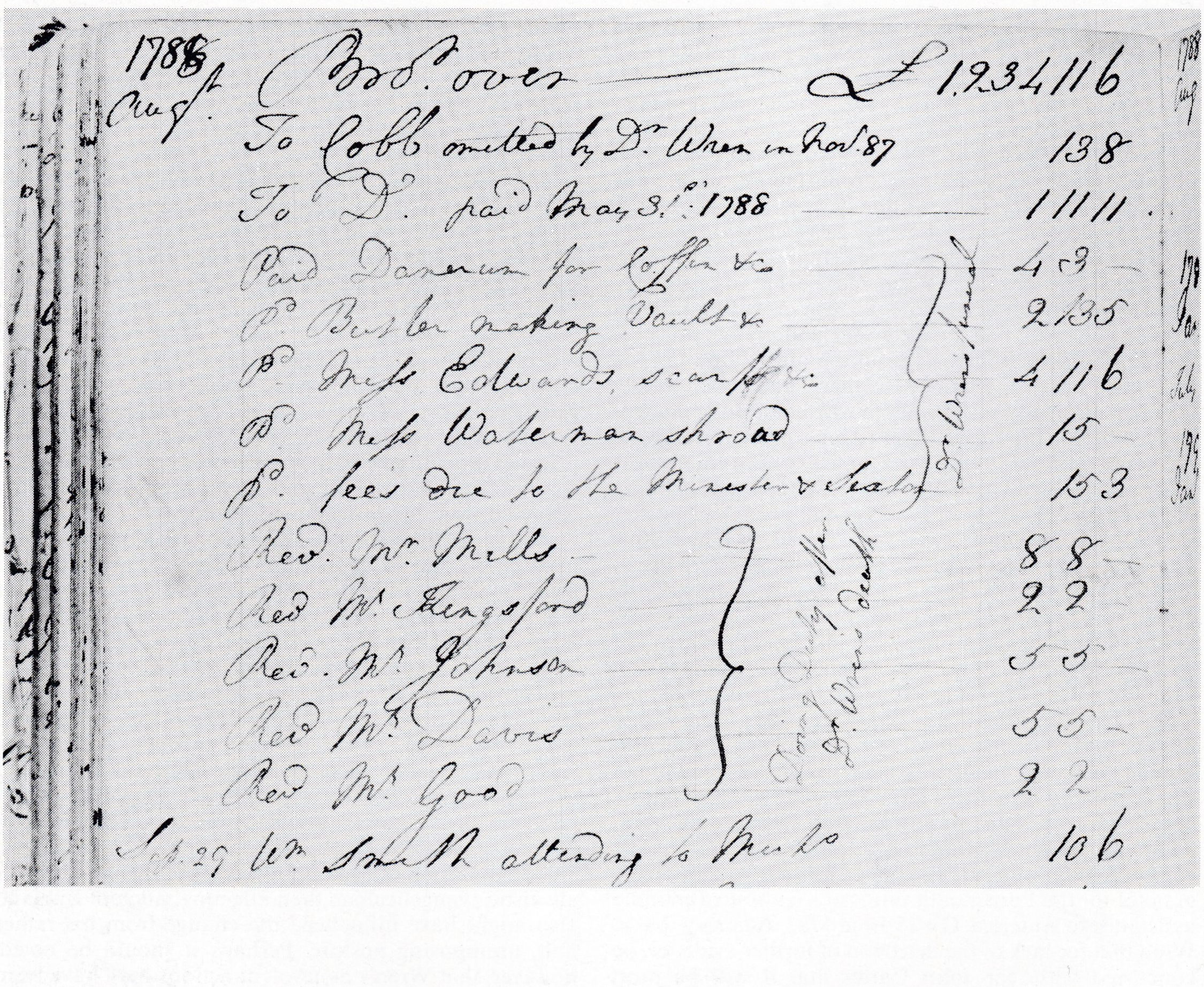
Meanwhile, the closing of Forton as a wartime prison in 1783 had ended Wren's humanitarian efforts there, but, as indicated in his church's records, he continued to work for charitable causes in England. As a result of these altruistic acts, he became known as 'the John Howard of his neighbourhood'. He also continued to go northward on his vacations to the beautiful Lake District of his youth. There he was also respected for his amiability and knowledge, and he was even invited to settle as a minister in Keswick. Wren declined the offer, however, and returned to his Portsmouth chapel where he continued to preach until his death, 'after an illness of a few days', on 30 October 1787.[81]

Among the individuals in England who openly supported the Patriot cause during the American Revolution, the Revd Dr Wren was unique. Men such as Charles Fox, William Pitt, Lord Abingdon, and Edmund Burke openly orated against the war, but these men did not take their opposition to the hostilities to the point of treason as the Portsmouth minister had done. Additionally, while several individuals in England such as Thomas Digges, David Hartley, and Thomas Hodgson had joined Wren in gathering subscriptions for American captives, Thomas Wren, unlike Digges, was not accused of pocketing prisoner relief funds. In fact, the records reveal that Wren was never reimbursed for some of the monies that he had provided from his own limited resources.[82]

Wren's motives for his altruistic acts appear to have been both political and ethical according to his letter to Elias Boudinot. In it, he indicated a strong sympathy for the ideals of the American Revolution as well as a magnanimous concern for the prisoners at Forton. He might also have been impelled into his obviously courageous involvement with enemy prisoners by a strong sectarian empathy for the captives, most of whom were fellow dissenters from the Anglican faith. And it was commonly known by non-conformist ministers in England that their counterparts in America had far greater religious liberty than themselves, even in colonies with an Episcopal establishment.

Humanitarian adages from the scriptures or from the altruistic evangelicalism then affecting much of England also might have influenced the change from his rather dull, unimposing posture. Perhaps it should be noted, however, that Wren's benevolent actions may have been somewhat selective. There is no evidence that he gave French prisoners the same attention and concern that he bestowed on Americans, and his letters to David Hartley (1778–80) are laced with nationalistic sentiments against England's Gallic foe.[83] Nonetheless his effective, firm, and supportive actions on behalf of the downtrodden Americans who were regarded as traitors was certainly exemplary. And, moreover, he performed these actions in addition to the time consuming demands of his ministry. Perhaps then, the lines on his devastated memorial should offer the final insight into and measure of the man: 'He was no less eminent For the peculiar Virtues of the Christian profession, Meekness of spirit, gentleness of manner, and an active and universal benevolence.'

Thomas Wren's funeral expenses, August 1788.
PCRO CHU 82/9/3.



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